

- The Trail of the Serpent -

Being the True and Astonishing Story of John A. Graham's Rascalities in Liberty County, Covering a Period of Years During Which He Stole Nearly all the County

BY CLAUDE L'ENGLE.

"He was as mild a mannered man as ever slit a throat or scuttled a boat."

The Forbes Purchase.

General William Augustus Bowles was a Marylander, who held a command in the British army in the Revolutionary War. He was a man of brilliant mind, versatile talents and doubtful honor. Dismissed from the British army at Pensacola, he turned pirate and cruised the Apalachicola bay and neighboring waters in a small boat manned by Indians, carrying a six-pounder.

His piratical adventures were so successful that he amassed a comfortable fortune, married the daughter of an Indian chief and lived among the Creeks. In 1789 he led an unsuccessful expedition against Pensacola, then in the hands of the Spaniards, and was for this act restored to favor with the English. He soon became dissatisfied with his life and went north and became an actor, and afterwards achieved a reputation as a portrait painter in the Bahamas.

Returning to America he was sent to establish a trading post among the Indians, but being ambitious his mission did not satisfy him, so he went among the Indians and persuaded them to join him in making war against the Spaniards.

So persuasive was he that the Indians not only consented to join him, but gave him the title of King of Florida, and under his leadership, marched against St. Marks and captured the fort. Shortly afterwards the Spaniards forced him to give it up and his Indian followers surrendered him, whom they now called the Lying Captain, to the Spaniards who took him to Moro Castle where he ended his adventurous life in its dungeons.

In 1803 a great tract of land bordering on the Apalachicola River and St. George Sound was ceded by Spain to John Forbes & Co., successors to the firm of Panton Leslie & Co., in payment of debts incurred by the Indians and for depredations their boats had suffered from the piratical adventures of William Augustus Bowles.

Bowles Reincarnated in Graham.

If I could subscribe to belief in the re-incarnation of spirits, I would say that the spirit of William Augustus Bowles, pirate and adventurer, had been re-incarnated in John Alexander Graham, of Manatee. Bowles had seen the land, and had forced unwilling tribute to the black flag, under which he sailed. Graham operated on the land, but his methods were none the less those of the pirate.

Between the Ocklocknee and Apalachicola rivers lies the county of Liberty, a large part of which was the original Forbes purchase. From border to border, life moves on simply, naturally, its quiet undisturbed and unbroken by the shrill whistle of the locomotive, or any of the sounds attendant upon the march of development—virginal and primeval.

In Arcadian simplicity the people tilled the soil, in peace their children grew to manhood and womanhood around the humble home, married and lived just as they had lived before them. Kind-hearted, trusting, law-abiding, content in the homely plenty the soil yielded for their simple wants, they lived their allotted time and were gathered to their fathers.

Bristol, the county seat, is a clean little village of perhaps two or three hundred people, although the census gives it a population of only fifty. To reach Bristol you go by boat from the landing at River Junction down the river. About thirty or forty miles, as the bird flies, you find the town, hidden away a mile from the river, high up among the pines and black-jacks.

To this Arcadian corner where the razor-back roams the streets, his rights unquestioned, and where the whip-poor-will and nooting owl hold nightly concerts, while the stars look down from the peaceful heavens, along in the eighties came a young man who was employed as clerk in the State Department of Education under Superintendent Russell.

Enter the Serpent.

John A. Graham's advent into Liberty county was to lecture at the Teacher's Institute held that year at Bristol. His polished manners and fluent tongue gained him the friendship of the simple, trusting people he met, and on this trip, lecturing to the teachers, he laid the plan of the boldest piece of piracy that has been perpetrated in Lib-

erty County since the days of William Augustus Bowles.

When he returned to Tallahassee he began buying tax certificates to land in Liberty County, from W. D. Barnes, then Comptroller. At first he bought them covering forty-acre tracts, then one-hundred-acre tracts, next whole sections and townships, paying in some instances LESS THAN FOUR MILLS PER ACRE. For certificates covering one tract of forty-five thousand acres he paid \$175.00. Abstracts now on record in Liberty County show that Graham had tax deeds to two hundred thousand acres, purchased from the State for a song.

In 1887 Graham returned to Liberty County and began logging on a large scale, supplying the large mills at Carrabelle with logs. He employed a large number of teams and men and paid big wages. He operated in the county from 1887 to 1893. During those years he cut a wide swath in the section, he fitted up a handsome office in Tallahassee and became known as a "young Napoleon of Finance."

His manner was pleasing, but he had the face of a villain, the ethics of a freebooter and the methods of a pirate.

During the years 1887-1892 he sold 400,000 acres of land in Liberty County to which he had ABSOLUTELY NO LEGAL TITLE, except tax deeds that were QUESTIONED ON THEIR FACE, to 200,000 acres.

When Graham set out to steal Liberty County it was necessary for him to have assistance. The clerk of the court, D. G. Harrell, was a man described as a good, well-meaning man, but very weak, and a drunkard. Graham's keen eye discovered in him an easy victim. He bent all his accomplishments of tongue and manner, supplemented by bountiful supplies of whiskey, freely administered, and Harrell became as wax in his hands. The things he would not have done sober, he did drunk.

Graham had access to the clerk's office AT ALL TIMES and spent his time there. He made abstracts of deeds which HARRELL CERTIFIED, making alterations, it is said, to include lands not originally included in the schedules.

Another victim he found in Haley T. Blocker, who was the last receiver appointed by the court for the Apalachicola Land Co. This company had large holdings of timber lands, of the original Forbes purchase, granted in payment of Bowles depredations, early in 1800. These lands had practically ALL BEEN SOLD by John Beard and other former receivers of the Apalachicola Land Co. When Mr. Beard's receivership was terminated, Haley T. Blocker was appointed to confirm Mr. Beard's sales and to wind up the affairs of the company.

Page 652 of Book F, Records of Liberty County, shows entry of a deed from Haley T. Blocker, Receiver, to John Alexander Graham, under date of Feb. 24, 1888, to 135,000 acres of land. Following this is an entry of tax deed from the State to Graham conveying 200,000 acres and four other entries of deeds from Blocker to Graham conveying various large tracts. Entries show these lands in tracts varying from 10,000 to 135,000 acres sold by Graham to James L. Gates of Milwaukee, Wis., for which he was paid approximately \$220,000.

Whether Graham actually had deeds from Blocker to all these lands or not is not known, but after he had fortified himself with abstracts to everything he wanted certified by Harrell, Clerk of the Court, he went to Chicago and sold the lands, about 400,000 acres, to James L. Gates of Milwaukee.

The deeds from Blocker were later SHOWN TO BE FRAUDULENT, the lands having already been sold by former receivers, and were set aside by Judge Walker in a decree in which he declared them void. See record Leon County, Garr et al. vs. Apalachicola Land Co.

After the sale to Gates the question of the validity of Graham's title was raised, and Gates sent his lawyer to Bristol to make investigations, but when he arrived, late in 1889, he found ONE OF THE RECORD BOOKS HAD MYSTERIOUSLY DISAPPEARED. He went back to Milwaukee to confer with Gates and upon his return found that Harrell had abandoned his office, and THE OTHER RECORD BOOK HAD ALSO DISAPPEARED. Harrell had become a hopeless sot and a few months later was reported to have died in Georgia.

That Graham stole, or caused to be stolen the record books D and E NO ONE IN LIBERTY

COUNTY DOUBTS. He will forever rest under the unproven charges. He and Harrell, the clerk he SUBORNED AND RUINED, WERE THE ONLY PERSONS WHO COULD HAVE BEEN BENEFITTED BY THEIR DISAPPEARANCE and the fact that the second book was stolen after Harrell abandoned his office, and the additional fact THAT GRAHAM WAS THE ONLY PERSON who had free access to the office, point conclusively to Graham AS THE GUILTY PARTY.

With his certified abstracts, AND THE ORIGINALS GONE, his claims had but one weak spot, the fact that Blocker's deeds would not stand the tests of the courts.

Gates finding himself possessed of 400,000 acres of land of doubtful title, for which he had paid over \$200,000, acknowledged himself bitten, and perhaps wisely concluding that "the hair of the hound is good for the wound," entered into a contract with Graham in which he promised to pay him a commission to sell the lands.

Graham succeeded in selling 100,000 acres for Gates for \$100,000, and sued Gates for his commission. Col. Robert W. Williams represented Graham.

During the trial Judge Walker said from the bench that he knew Graham to be a scoundrel and it was his duty to protect Gates, who was not represented by counsel, from him. Notwithstanding this attitude Graham secured judgment for \$23,027.95, not because he had title to the lands, because it was proven in another case that Graham's title to a large part of them was no good; but, because Gates had promised to pay for a specific service and Graham proved that he had performed the service.

Under this judgment a part of the lands sold to Gates by Graham were levied on by the sheriff, Graham thereby obtained sheriff's deed to 98,560 acres for which he paid, under the judgment, \$23,027.95. This deed was recorded Sept. 13, 1890, Book F, pages 100-101, Records of Liberty County.

This deed laid the foundation for a new steal by Graham. He subsequently sold to David C. Wilson, his father-in-law, for the alleged consideration of \$50,000, under warranty deed, a large body of land, including the lands conveyed by the sheriff's deed. An examination of the records (Book H, pages 113-115, Liberty County) shows that to a part of the lands conveyed by Graham to David Wilson, he had absolutely no title, having conveyed them by warranty deed to James L. Gates previously, and they WERE NOT INCLUDED IN THE SHERIFF'S DEED TO GRAHAM. Sections 11, 12, 13, 14, 24, 25, 26, 27, 34, 35, 36, Township 3, South R. 8, West, shown by abstract to have been conveyed to Gates. THEY ARE NOT RECONVEYED TO GRAHAM BY THE SHERIFF'S DEED, but are conveyed by him to David C. Wilson, under full warranty deed. Yet the records show that he had no title to them, except the title that any other thief thinks he has to property of other people that seems unprotected. These lands were afterwards mortgaged to the Land Mortgage Bank of Jacksonville by Wilson for \$18,000, as is shown by the records of Liberty County, Book H, Pages 133-136, dated Feb. 24, 1893. Examination of the records further show that Graham continued to sell, giving warranty and quit claim deeds, various tracts of Liberty County lands formerly sold by him to Gates, WHICH NEVER HAD BEEN RECONVEYED TO HIM BY THE SHERIFF'S DEED.

Instances like these could be multiplied, the trail of the serpent is all over the county. The loss of the records threw land matters into a hopeless muddle.

Nine out of every ten men who knew Graham in Liberty County when asked about him will say "He is a grand rascal and almost ruined this county." There are a number of men at Bristol, Mr. I. W. Revells, Mr. Roberts, Mr. Frank Hentz, Mr. Frank Edwards, Mr. C. R. Warren of Blountstown, and others, not one of whom dissented from the general verdict that Graham is a bold unscrupulous rascal. Yet withal he was so plausible and pleasant that the men he robbed confess to a certain admiration for him. As one man he had cheated by selling him land under a worthless title expressed it: "He was the nicest damned scoundrel I ever saw."

After Harrell abandoned the clerk's office M. J. Solomon was appointed ad interim. William Hentz was a candidate for the office at the next election. Graham took an active part in the can-

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